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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to ascertain if the teaching of sentence building by means of specific sentence patterns would result in an increased use of these sentence patterns in the written compositions of second grade children. Writing samples were obtained from a group of second grade children both before and after the treatment and were analyzed for the number of modified T-units they contained. The experimental teaching technique, which involved a total of 15 lessons over a six-week period, used a noun-verb sentence pattern. Each new part of the pattern was developed through an oral, visual, and written stage. The lessons dealt with nouns, verbs, articles, adjectives, and adverbs and how these elements combined into various patterns. Initial capitalization and end punctuation were stressed as elements of a complete sentence. The results showed that the teaching method did not produce a statistically significant increase in the use of the same pattern in children's narrative writing. (FL)

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THE EFFECT OF TEACHING SENTENCE
PATTERNS ON THE WRITTEN SENTENCE
STRUCTURES OF GRADE TWO CHILDREN

by

Rita Stock

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A great majority of primary children have been shown to have problems writing complete capitalized and punctuated sentences (Hunt 1965, Mazur 1976). They are competent in the use of oral language (Brown and Bellugi 1972) but not as proficient as writers of the same language. Children at this age group use an excessive amount of run-on sentences and connectives such as "and" in their sentence writing (Hunt 1965). They also frequently omit initial capitalization and end punctuation (Mazur 1976).

This study attempted to experiment with a method of teaching a specific capitalized and punctuated sentence pattern. Other studies, such as those by Hunt (1965) and Loban (1976), have experimented with maturity of sentence constructs; but none have dealt with the surface structure correctness of sentences, nor with narrative writing. It is these two features that made this study different from others.

The study was based on four main premises. The first was that the noun-verb sentence pattern would account for much of children's writings (Everetts 1967, Strickland 1962, O'Donnell 1967). The second premise was that three of the most common errors found in young children's writings (grade one through eight) were the omission of initial capital letters and terminal punctuation and the use of run-on sentences (Mazur 1976). The third premise, based on a study by Johnson (1967), was that simple sentences are most common in the narrative mode of writing. The fourth premise was the belief that the teaching of, and practice in using particular sentence patterns would result in a greater production of

these patterns in children's writings (Miller and Ney 1969, Mellon 1969, O'Hare 1973 and Bateman and Zidonis 1966).

Therefore, the narrative mode of writing was chosen to encourage the greatest number of simple sentences and the noun-verb pattern was chosen because it has been shown to be a high frequency paradigm of young children. Special attention was paid to the elimination of some of the most frequent areas of writing errors. This was the foundation for the present study.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to ascertain if the teaching and practicing of sentence building, by means of teaching specific capitalized and punctuated noun-verb sentence patterns, would result in the increase of these sentence patterns in the written narrative compositions of a sample of second grade children.

Syntactic Measurement

Modified T-units

The term T-unit, or "minimal terminable unit" was used by Hunt (1965) as an index of the level of maturity in children's writing. It contained one main clause plus subordinate clauses attached or embedded. Walter Loban (1976) used the "communication unit". It was, in effect, a group of words not further divided without loss of meaning. For purposes of measurement in the following study, the term T-unit, as defined by Hunt, has been limited to exclude all but those units having a noun-verb pattern, in a subject-predicate order. It may or may not have a subordinate

clause attached to it. Because of these restrictions, the T-units have been referred to as modified T-units.

T₁ unit

For the purposes of this study, this term referred to modified T-units which were complete with initial capitalization and end punctuation.

T₂ unit

This term referred to modified T-units which were either not capitalized, not punctuated with end punctuation, or were missing both capitalization and punctuation.

T-unit ratio scores

This term referred to the ratio of capitalized and punctuated modified T-units (T₁) to the total of all the modified T-units, whether capitalized and punctuated, or otherwise (T₁ and T₂).

$$\frac{T_1}{T_1 + T_2} = \text{T-unit ratio scores}$$

It was not within the scope of the study to evaluate other important areas such as rhetorical effectiveness (meaning) and the composing process. Measurement was limited to the surface structure of the patterns.

Sample

The group of children was drawn from a heterogeneous second grade open area classroom. Seventy-five word samples of narrative writings from the whole classroom were obtained prior to the

beginning of the experiment, and again at the end. Both pre- and post-narratives were analysed for the number of modified T-units they contained. The T-unit ratio score was found for each:

$$\frac{\text{capitalized and punctuated T-units}}{\text{capitalized and punctuated T-units (T}_1\text{)}} + \frac{\text{uncapitalized and/or non-punctuated T-units (T}_2\text{)}}{\text{uncapitalized and/or non-punctuated T-units (T}_2\text{)}} = \text{T-unit ratio score}$$

From the first set of scores, nineteen matched pairs were formulated to form the basis of the experimental (y) and control (x) group. The second set of scores, for both the control and the experimental groups, were submitted to a sign test. Further qualitative analysis was done on the relationship of the T-unit ratio scores to reading group placement, sex of the student, other sentence patterns, and mean number of T_1 's.

Treatment

The experimental group was taught a total of fifteen lessons over a period of six weeks. The sentence pattern used was the noun-verb (subject-predicate) pattern. Each new part of the pattern was developed through an oral, visual, and written stage. Dramatization and oral practice was followed by pictorial representation before the abstract process of actually writing was applied. The lessons dealt with nouns, verbs, articles, adjectives, adverbs and how these elements combined into various noun-verb patterns. At all times, initial capitalization and end punctuation were stressed as elements of a complete sentence.

Results

TABLE 1

POST EXPERIMENT T-UNIT RATIO SCORES AND ACCOMPANYING
SIGN TEST VALUES FOR EACH OF THE MATCHED PAIRS

	Experimental y	Control x	Difference	Value
1	.29	0	.29	+
2	.09	.2	-.11	-
3	0	0	0	0
4	.33	0	.33	+
5	.73	0	.73	+
6	.25	0	.25	+
7	.13	0	.13	+
8	0	0	0	0
9	.77	.5	.27	+
10	.8	.38	.42	+
11	.17	.2	-.03	-
12	.09	.2	-.11	-
13	.58	.2	.38	+
14	.09	.67	-.58	-
15	.22	.27	-.05	-
16	.22	.82	-.6	-
17	.7	0	.7	+
18	1	.7	.3	+
19	.36	.8	-.44	-
Mean	.36	.26		
S.D.	3.79	2.58		
n	= 17		$S_1 = 7$	
α	= .05		Critical value = 4	

The results of the sign test are represented in Table 1. The obtained S_1 of seven resulted in a failure to reject the Null-hypothesis that the distribution of plus and minus signs differ significantly from equality. The one-tailed probability reached a level of only .315.

The results of data collected from other areas follow:
reading group placement T-unit ratio score increase or decrease did not correlate with reading group placement. Table 2 shows the results.

TABLE 2

RELATIONSHIP OF READING GROUP PLACEMENT TO PLUS OR MINUS VALUE OF T-UNIT RATIO SCORES

Reading Placement	T-unit Ratio Score Increase	T-unit Ratio Score Decrease	T-unit Ratio Score No Change
Low			
Experimental	1	--	1
Control	--	--	1
Middle			
Experimental	6	5	1
Control	5	3	6
High			
Experimental	2	3	--
Control	2	3	--
	16	14	9

mean number of T_1 's Almost twice as many experimental students as control students increased their T_1 units. The mean number of T_1 's changed from 2.21 to 4. Table 3 tabulates the results.

TABLE 3
MEAN NUMBER OF T_1 'S AND T_2 'S PER STUDENT

	Experimental	Control
Pre-test T_1	2.21	2.36
Post-test T_1	4	2.57
Pre-test T_2	8.63	9.05
Post-test T_2	8.16	8.94

Table 4 shows that the experimental group increased its use of the T_1 unit from 20% to 52% of the total T-units as compared to a percentage increase of only 1.54% for the control group

TABLE 4
PERCENT OF T_1 'S, FOR BOTH GROUPS, IN THE TOTAL
NUMBER OF T'S BEFORE AND AFTER THE EXPERIMENT

	T-unit	Pre-test	Post-test
Experimental Group	T_1	42	76
	T_2	164	146
	Total of T_1 & T_2	206	220
	% of T_1 's in total number	20%	52%
Control Group	T_1	45	49
	T_2	172	171
	Total of T_1 & T_2	217	220
	% of T_1 's in total number	20.73%	22.27%

sex of the student The mean T-unit ratio scores remained almost unchanged for the males of the experimental group but the mean T-unit ratio scores of the females more than doubled (.24 to .51). A comparison of the control group did not reveal any great differences due to the sex of the student. The figures are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5

COMPARISON OF PRE- AND POST-TEST T-UNIT RATIO SCORES FOR THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP, BASED ON SEX OF THE STUDENT

	Male Pre-test Ratio Scores	Male Post-test Ratio Scores	Female Pre-test Ratio Scores	Female Post-test Ratio Scores
Total	2.26	2.74	1.93	4.08
Mean	.21	.25	.24	.51

other patterns Table 6 shows how, in the experimental group, the number of fragmented sentences (noun or verb missing) were halved by the end of the experiment. In Table 7 the data reveals that the use of other sentence patterns by the experimental group was almost eliminated.

TABLE 6

TOTAL NUMBER OF FRAGMENTED SENTENCES FOUND IN PRE- AND POST-TEST SAMPLES OF EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUPS

	Pre-test	Post-test
Experimental	8	4
Control	7	5

TABLE 7

TOTAL NUMBER OF OTHER SENTENCE PATTERNS FOUND
IN PRE- AND POST-TEST WRITING SAMPLES OF BOTH
EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUPS

	Pre-test	Post-test
Experimental	15	2
Control	11	8

Discussion

While the Null-hypothesis tested failed to be rejected, analysis of the other qualitative data revealed some interesting trends. The T-unit ratio scores were not dependent upon reading group placement. An analysis of the T_1 scores suggested that many of the experimental students were learning the pattern but that they were not applying the pattern to their compositions.

The fact that the female students in the experimental group more than doubled their mean T_1 scores, as compared to their male counterparts, was an interesting outcome of the study. This could lead to a supposition about their ability to grasp the concept of sentence patterns and their adaptability to the experimental form of instruction. Other studies such as Fox's (1972) and Ciani's (1976) have not been able to show differences in syntactical maturity related to the sex of the student. However, the present study was concerned with correct form only and may have accounted for the difference. The use of other sentence patterns had been almost eliminated from the experimental group's

post-test writings. Perhaps the instruction involved in the experiment was responsible for this.

The children were definitely making more use of the T_1 units in their writings, often to the exclusion of other sentence patterns.

It may well be possible that through direct instruction the experimental group was increasing its sensitivity to the particular noun-verb syntactic structure. However, the increased sensitivity did not lead to a parallel use of the pattern in their communication skills. O'Donnell and Smith (1975), in a short four week trial of teaching syntactic structures, came to a similar conclusion.

Conclusions

Teaching and having children practice a specific noun-verb sentence pattern, complete with initial capitalization and end punctuation, did not result in a statistically significant increase ($P = .315$) in the use of the same pattern in children's narrative writing. Therefore, the alternate research hypothesis could not be accepted.

The experiment did not result in a significant difference between the control group and the experimental group at the .05 level of significance. Analysis of other qualitative data did, however, suggest that on an individual basis, the experimental group did actually increase its use of the particular sentence pattern involved. The findings suggested that the experimental students were learning to use the T_1 sentence pattern involved (capitalized and punctuated noun-verb paradigm) but that the information was not reflected in the T-unit ratio scores.

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